# Looking Back and Moving Forward with *Pillars of Eternity*

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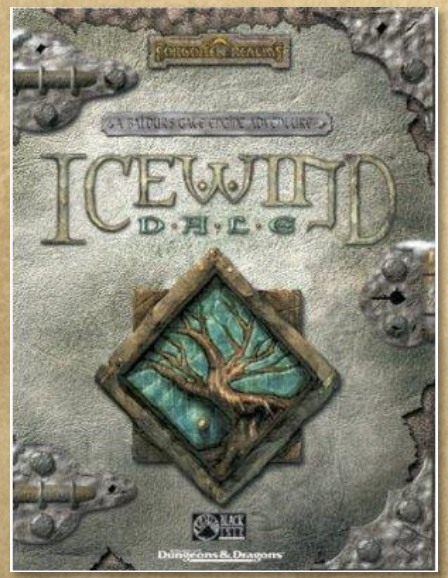
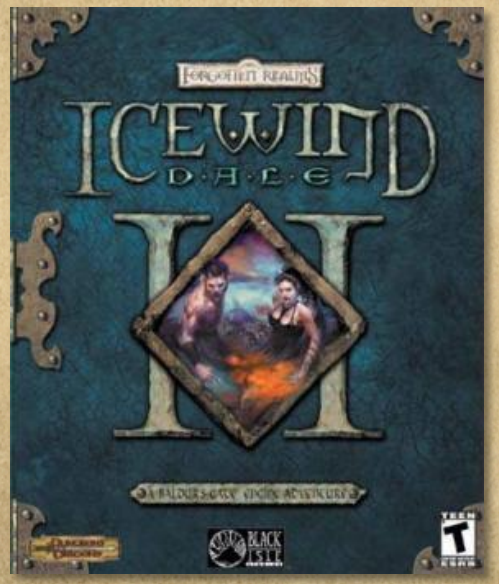
# What's This All About?

- Pillars of Eternity - More than a post-mortem!
- Making retro-styled games
  - The appeal to gamers
  - The inherent dangers
  - Our learning experiences

4 Years Ago – RIP, Little Angel



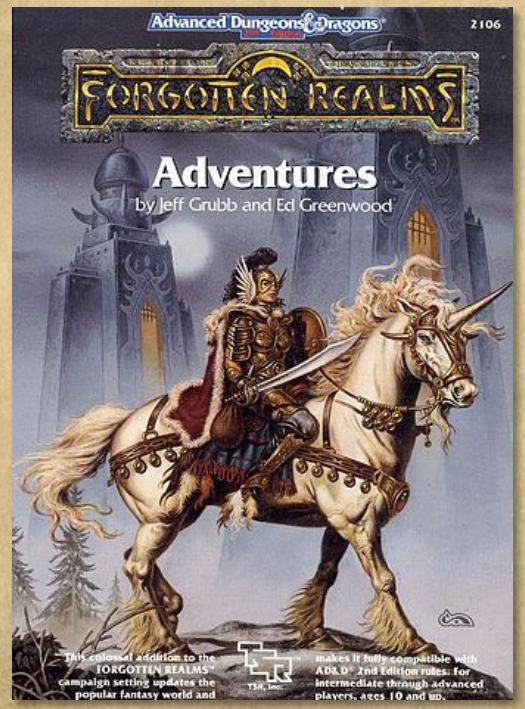




# Who Am I?

- Josh Sawyer - Design Director, Obsidian Entertainment
- Game Director and System Designer, Pillars of Eternity, Fallout: New Vegas
- Level Designer, Icewind Dale
- Lead Designer, Icewind Dale II
- 30 Year TTRPG Player

# The Rapid Rise of *Project* Eternity

- Inspired by Doublefine Adventure
- Infinity Engine-like game:
  - Baldur's Gate
  - Icewind Dale
  - Planescape: Torment
- Forgotten Realms-*y*, A/D&D-*y*
- Very successful very quickly
- Seat-of-the-pants design



# The Appeal of Retrogaming

- Nostalgia
- Challenge
- Wildcards!

# The Appeal - Nostalgia

Pool of Radiance

Darklands

The Bard's Tale

# The Appeal – Challenge

Baldur's Gate II
Kangaxx

Icewind Dale
Yxunomei

# The Appeal – Wildcards!

Golden Pantaloons

Noober

# The Deadly Dangers of Retro Revival

- Hitting the wrong targets.
- Designing for a tiny niche.
- Updating too much.
- Missing the *~ *soul* ~*.

# Soul is Elusive

- Memory is selective and emotions are a (big) part of it.
- Individual elements contribute to the whole – modify with caution!
- Spirit is more important (and often healthier) than accuracy.

# Environment and Character Art

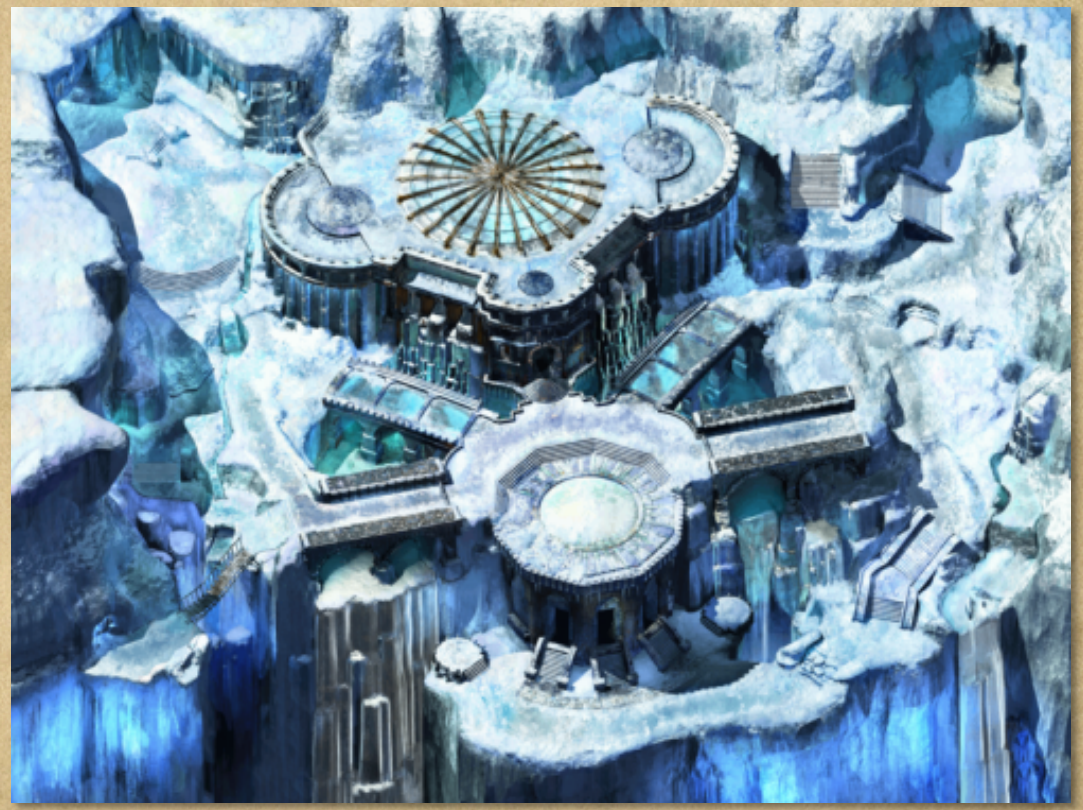
- 2D Environments (isometric), hand-touched, with 3D Lighting
- 2nd Edition AD&D
  - Elmore, Easley, Parkinson, Caldwell, Fields, Brom.
  - Less saturated palettes.
  - *Relatively* realistic weapons and armor.

Larry Elmore

Keith Parkinson

# Classic Isometric Look and Feel

Baldur's Gate II



Icewind Dale

# Pillars of Eternity Isometric

- Dynamic Lighting
- Lower Angle on Exteriors
- Still Hand-Touched

# Character Art

- Realistic proportions made characters harder to read.
- Lack of LoD system made inventory models look poor.

# Art Post-Mortem

- Well-received, but environment criticized for being too static, characters not detailed enough.
- Lesson: Vintage style can still be improved upon with new features.
- Future: Improve dynamic elements (lighting, shadows, foliage, weather, cloth). Use new LoD system, PBR, and better pipelines for improved character models.

# User Interface / User Experience

- Skeuomorphic GUI
- Similar Hotkeys and Layout (IWD2, PST)
- Cursors, Icons, but no Sketches

Baldur's Gate

Baldur's Gate II

Icewind Dale

Icewind Dale II

Planescape: Torment

# Compact HUD Layout (Open or Solid)

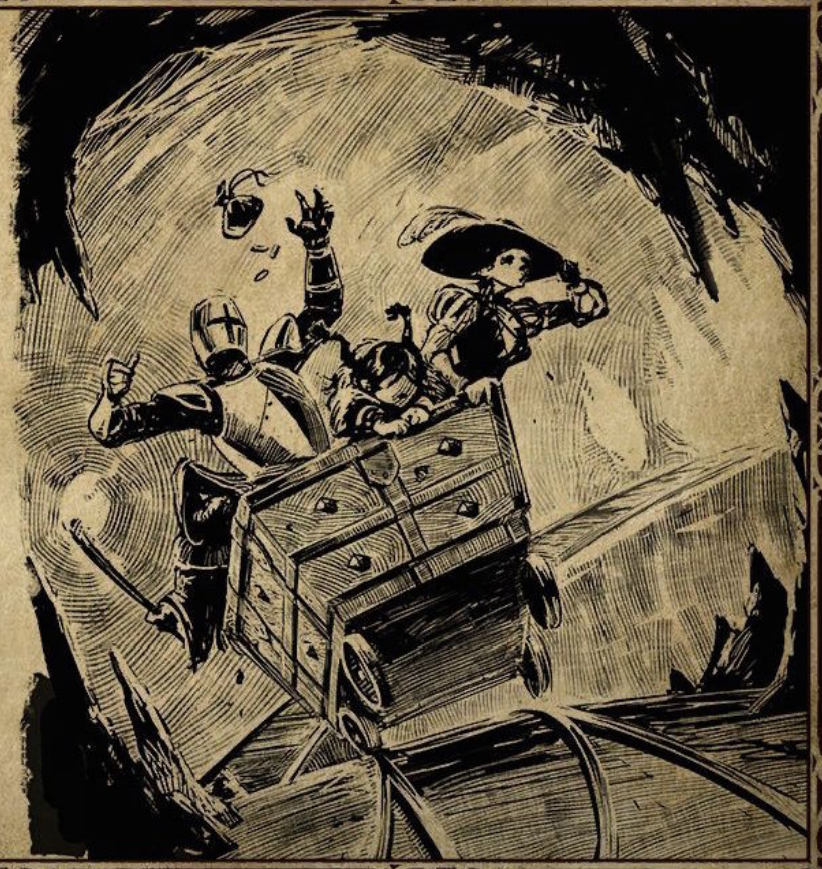
## Cursors

## Item Sketches

# Scripted Interactions

After a sharp turn, you find yourself rapidly approaching a fork in the tracks. One track leads left, and another, upward and to the right.

1: [Ride along.]
2: [Look around quickly.]
3: [Tell everyone to lean right.]



# IE Mod for Pillars of Eternity

Baldur's Gate

Pillars of Eternity

# UI/UX Post-Mortem

- Some backers hated the GUI layout and modded it. No professional reviews had negative feedback about it. People missed sketches, so we brought them back. People *loved* scripted interactions.
- Lesson: UI can be divisive. Don't try to make everyone happy.
- Future: Continue improving GUI for usability, don't engineer out GUI modding. More scripted interactions!

# Game Mechanics

- A/D&D-*like*
- Fewer arbitrary limitations, fewer exceptions
- Faster early combat pace, with a Slow option for later
- No party AI at launch (later added for The White March)
- Limited moddability
- Stronghold had limited time for content

# Combat Pace – A Mixed Bag

clsrcreq.2da - Notepad

File Edit Format View Help

```
2DA V1.0

0

          HUMAN    ELF      HALF_ELF
DWARF     HALFLING          GNOME    HALFORC
MAGE      1        1        1        0
0         1        0
FIGHTER   1        1        1        1
1         1        1
CLERIC    1        1        1        1
1         1        1
THIEF     1        1        1        1
1         1        1
BARD      1        0        1        0
0         0        0
PALADIN   1        0        0        0
0         0        0
DRUID     1        0        1        0
0         0        0
RANGER    1        1        1        0
0         0        0
SORCERER  1        1        1        1
0         0        0        0
MONK      1        0        0        0
0         0        0
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Near Infinity - Baldur's Gate: Enhanced Edition

Game File Edit Search Tools Options Help

- K_C_HO.2DA
- K_D_D.2DA
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2DA V1.0

| | ROWNAME | LOWER | MIXED | HELP | ABILITIES | PROFICIENCY | UNUSABLE | CLASS | KITIDS |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| * | | | | | | | | | |
| 0 | RESERVE | * | * | * | * | * | * | * | * |
| 1 | BERSERKER | 25298 | 25329 | 24284 | CLABFI02 | 29 | 0x00000001 | 2 | 0x00004001 |
| 2 | WIZARD_SLAYER | 25299 | 25330 | 24285 | CLABFI03 | 30 | 0x00000002 | 2 | 0x00004002 |
| 3 | KENSAI | 25300 | 25331 | 24286 | CLABFI04 | 31 | 0x00000004 | 2 | 0x00004003 |
| 4 | CAVALIER | 25301 | 25332 | 24287 | CLABPA02 | 32 | 0x00000008 | 6 | 0x00004004 |
| 5 | INQUISITOR | 25302 | 25333 | 24288 | CLABPA03 | 33 | 0x00000010 | 6 | 0x00004005 |
| 6 | UNDEAD_HUNTER | 25303 | 25334 | 24289 | CLABPA04 | 34 | 0x00000020 | 6 | 0x00004006 |
| 7 | FERALAN | 25304 | 25335 | 24298 | CLABRN02 | 35 | 0x00008000 | 12 | 0x00004007 |
| 8 | STALKER | 25305 | 25336 | 24299 | CLABRN03 | 36 | 0x00010000 | 12 | 0x00004008 |
| 9 | BEASTMASTER | 25306 | 25337 | 24300 | CLABRN04 | 37 | 0x00020000 | 12 | 0x00004009 |
| 10 | ASSASIN | 25307 | 25338 | 24301 | CLABTH02 | 38 | 0x00040000 | 4 | 0x0000400A |
| 11 | BOUNTY_HUNTER | 25308 | 25339 | 24302 | CLABTH03 | 39 | 0x00080000 | 4 | 0x0000400B |
| 12 | SWASHBUCKLER | 25309 | 25340 | 24303 | CLABTH04 | 40 | 0x00100000 | 4 | 0x0000400C |
| 13 | BLADE | 25310 | 25341 | 24304 | CLABBA02 | 41 | 0x00200000 | 5 | 0x0000400D |
| 14 | JESTER | 25311 | 25342 | 24305 | CLABBA03 | 42 | 0x00400000 | 5 | 0x0000400E |
| 15 | SKALD | 25312 | 25343 | 24306 | CLABBA04 | 43 | 0x00800000 | 5 | 0x0000400F |
| 16 | TOTEMIC_DRUID | 25313 | 25344 | 24310 | CLABDR02 | 44 | 0x08000000 | 11 | 0x00004010 |
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| 18 | BEAST_FRIEND | 25315 | 25346 | 24312 | CLABDR04 | 46 | 0x20000000 | 11 | 0x00004012 |
| 19 | TALOS | 24254 | 25347 | 24307 | CLABPR02 | 47 | 0x01000000 | 3 | 0x00004013 |
| 20 | HELM | 24255 | 25348 | 24308 | CLABPR03 | 48 | 0x02000000 | 3 | 0x00004014 |
| 21 | LATHANDER | 24256 | 25349 | 24309 | CLABPR04 | 49 | 0x04000000 | 3 | 0x00004015 |
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| 23 | CONJURER | 25320 | 25351 | 24291 | CLABMA06 | 22 | 0x00000080 | 1 | 0x00000080 |
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| 25 | ENCHANTER | 25322 | 25353 | 24293 | CLABMA09 | 24 | 0x00000200 | 1 | 0x00000200 |
| 26 | ILLUSIONIST | 25323 | 25354 | 24294 | CLABMA08 | 25 | 0x00000400 | 1 | 0x00000400 |
| 27 | INVOKER | 25324 | 25355 | 24295 | CLABMA07 | 26 | 0x00000800 | 1 | 0x00000800 |
| 28 | NECROMANCER | 25325 | 25356 | 24296 | CLABMA03 | 27 | 0x00001000 | 1 | 0x00001000 |
| 29 | TRANSMUTER | 25326 | 12788 | 24297 | CLABMA04 | 28 | 0x00002000 | 1 | 0x00002000 |
| 30 | WILDMAGE | 25327 | 24282 | 24283 | CLABMA01 | 52 | 0x80000000 | 1 | 0x80000000 |
| 31 | BARBARIAN | 25328 | 24229 | 24235 | CLABFI05 | 51 | 0x40000000 | 2 | 0x40000000 |
| 32 | Blackguard | 28604 | 28605 | 28606 | CLABPA06 | 53 | 0x00000021 | 6 | 0x00004020 |
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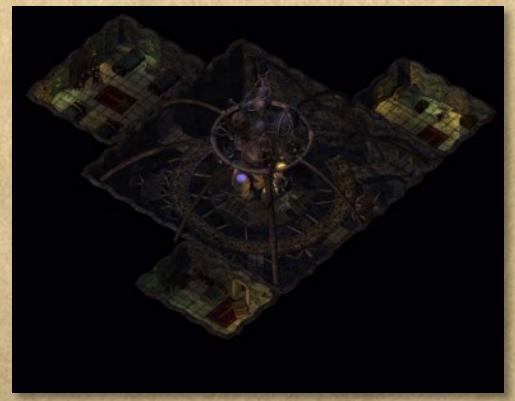
| 34 | DWARVEN_DEFENDER | 31973 | 31974 | 31975 | CLABFI06 | 55 | 0x00004000 | 2 | 0x00004022 |
| 35 | DRAGON_DISCIPLE | 31976 | 31977 | 31978 | CLABSO01 | 56 | 0x00004000 | 19 | 0x00004023 |
| 36 | DARK_MOON | 31979 | 31980 | 31981 | CLABMO02 | 57 | 0x00004000 | 20 | 0x00004024 |
| 37 | SUN_SOUL | 31982 | 31983 | 31984 | CLABMO03 | 58 | 0x00004000 | 20 | 0x00004025 |
| 38 | OHTYR | 32345 | 32345 | 32346 | OHTYR | 60 | 0x00004000 | 3 | 0x00004026 |

# Stronghold - Light on Content, Heavy on Systems



# Patch 3.0 - The Battle of Yenwood Field

As you crest a small hill overlooking Yenwood Field, Lord Gathbin's army is a flurry of activity, scurrying to and fro. Even from this distance, you can hear the drums of war beating their steady cadence designed to intimidate their foes while organizing the rank and file into battle formations.

Marshal Forywn approaches. "You've arrived just in time. Lord Gathbin's forces are beginning to move - an attack is imminent."

1: [Inspect your forces.]
2: "Any idea what Gathbin is planning?"
3: "Sound the horn, Marshal Forwyn. It's time to finish this."

# Game Mechanics Post-Mortem

- Easier to pick up than AD&D 2nd Ed., but lost some of the tactical complexity, combat became too fast with 5+ party members, stronghold was disappointing.
- Lesson: Some rough edges are fun, don't overcorrect (easier said than done), allow for modding if possible, pay attention to *why* people liked things (e.g. strongholds).
- Future: Carefully add back layers of complexity, find a better combat pace, use more accessible file formats, focus on stronghold *content* and integration.

# Music and Voice Acting

- Limited voice acting budget, spread thin
- Players and reviewers generally enjoyed the music but found the voice acting odd and inconsistent.
- Lesson: With limited resources, be careful not to spread too thin.
- Future: Innovate with leitmotif in compositions, be smarter about allocating voice acting.

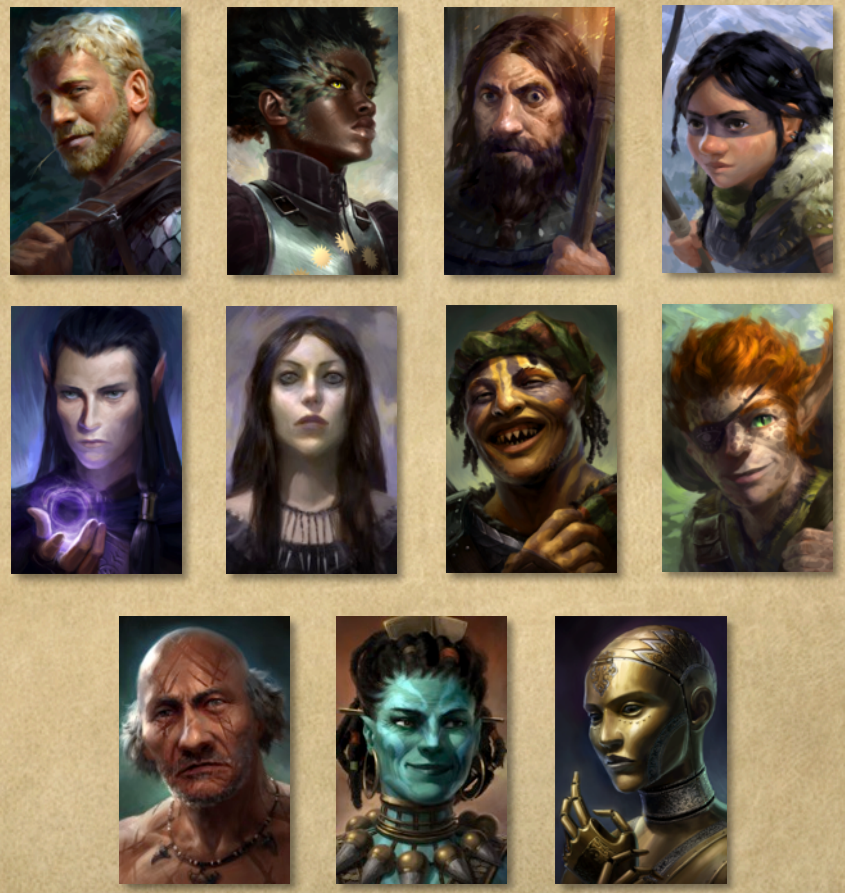
# Narrative and World Building

- Traditional fantasy world with some new elements
  - Elves and dwarves, orlans and aumaua, godlike
  - Eurocentric style, 16th century technology, Renaissance Zeitgeist
  - Blank slate character vs. predefinition (Baldur's Gate, Planescape: Torment)
- Companions, themes, quests, and tone of dialogue were more serious.

# Companions

## Diverse Group

## Serious Crew



# Narrative and WB Post-Mortem

- Players and reviewers had mixed to favorable reactions about the world and lore. There was a lot to learn and keep track of. Many players wished for more light, funny, or silly elements.
- Lesson: The tone and density of your source material is valuable and important to consider.
- Future: Introduce more diverse locations, be attentive to lore pacing, use Tyranny's highlight system, include *some* sillier characters – possibly a different companion type.

# Betas and Early Access

- August, 2014+
- Caveats don't go far, but Beta feedback *does* go far.
- Requires iteration.
- The vocal minority sometimes has a point... but reach out to your broader audience.

# Beta Post-Mortem

- Despite initial criticism, the Beta allowed for iteration and early feedback and did not seem to influence the launch. Patch Betas also helped catch a lot of issues.
- Lesson: Betas and Early Access are a fantastic way to get feedback from your most passionate players -- but remember that they're passionate!
- Future: Offer Betas/EA in the future, improve feedback loop, and find ways to increase the player base.

# Post-Launch Support – Incredibly Important!

- 12 Patches between April 3rd 2015 and July 11th 2016.
- Focus on play balance and UI:
  - Improving some weak classes (e.g. ranger, paladin, rogue)
  - Better GUI organization and RPG tooltips
  - Removing trash mobs/filler combat
- Focus on restoring some of the lost ingredients:
  - Stronghold content
  - "Hard" counters in combat and more robust AI
  - More distinctive items and item sketches (soulbound)

# What to Take, What to Leave

- Not every choice captures the soul, keep trying!
- Everything needs to be able to grow for the future.
- Listen to many, act on a few.

# Questions, Answers, and Thanks

twitter: @jesawyer

tumblr: http://jesawyer.tumblr.com/
(Frog Helms Fan Club)

Thanks to Feargus, Kaz, and all of the Pillars of Eternity backers, players, and fans!